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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 MANAMA 000456

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SUBJECT: POLITICAL ISLAM IN BAHRAIN (PART II): ISLAMISTS  
SUCCEED IN PROMOTING AGENDA IN PARLIAMENT

REF: A. 05 STATE 1580

[B](#). MANAMA 0339

Classified by DCM Susan L. Ziadeh for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

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Summary  
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[1](#)1. (C) Although their agenda is controversial and opposed by many, Sunni Islamists generally represent the interests of their constituents, in the view of non-Islamist members of the elected Council of Representatives (COR). Despite their success in passing non-binding resolutions on religious-oriented issues, the COR speaker often assigns these proposals the lowest priority for action. There is much debate about the relationship between the Sunni Islamist political blocs and the government. Most rival politicians agree that relations between the two are very good, with neither the Islamists nor the government interfering in issues of great importance to the other. The government certainly is careful to secure its Sunni base, but some speculate that it wants to use the parliament as a scapegoat for the country's problems, or to raise the specter of an Islamist-dominated COR as a scare tactic to be used against democracy advocates.

[1](#)2. (C) Summary continued: In a recent development, the new Salafi political society National Justice Movement was launched on March 5. Its leader calls it an opposition group but opponents refer to it as the "Salafi/Al Qaeda" organization. While the Sunni Islamist MPs have been successful in raising the profile of their agenda, it has been non-Islamist deputies who have been most active in promoting the COR's oversight and accountability functions. End Summary.

[1](#)3. (C) This cable is the second in a three-part series of reports covering political Islam in Bahrain. Part I (Ref B) discusses the three leading Islamic political societies and their agendas; Part II reports the views of competing political societies and politicians on the Islamist agenda; and Part III describes the reactions of civil society, business people, and liberals in the country.

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Sunni Islamists Accurately Represent Constituents...  
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[1](#)4. (C) Although their agenda is controversial, the Sunni Islamist political societies in the elected lower house of parliament, the Council of Representatives, accurately reflect the interests of their constituents, according to fellow COR members. With the approach of the parliamentary elections scheduled for October 2006, satisfying the political base has become even more urgent. Shia Islamic Bloc MPs Ali Al Samaheji, Mohammed Al Shaikh, and Abbas Salman told EmbOffs that the controversial issues championed by the Sunni Islamist blocs, Al Minbar (associated with the Muslim Brotherhood) and Al Asala (Sunni Salafi), such as calling for a ban on alcohol, amputating the hands of thieves, creating a committee for spreading virtue and punishing vice, closing businesses during Friday prayers, and segregating the sexes at Bahrain University, are the subjects of greatest concern to many of their constituents. To a great, but not universal extent, Sunnis are not as directly impacted by the economic and social ills harming Bahrain's Shia majority, Al Shaikh said. They are not afflicted with unemployment, lack of affordable housing, low wages, shoddy infrastructure, and bias in government jobs. In the absence of these more basic needs, Sunnis and their elected representatives can pursue a more narrow agenda focused on religious issues and their relevance for everyday life.

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...But Proposals Often Put in Deep Freeze  
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[1](#)5. (C) Al Minbar and Al Asala hold 12 of 40 seats in the COR and are among the most active members of the Council. Their activism, which often takes the form of a legislative device called an "iqtirah bi raghba," or desired proposal (similar to a "Sense of the Congress" resolution), to promote their

policy views, is unsettling to their opponents and the COR leadership. COR Speaker Dhahrani, a traditionalist, is under no obligation to act upon these desired proposals, and often gives them the lowest priority for action, according to MP Jasim Abdul Aal. However, he warned, the proposals can resurface when the government needs something from the Islamists. They can point to a proposal that has not been acted upon and request that the government implement it in exchange for their support.

16. (C) Ironically, COR votes on the Islamists' "iqtirah bi raghba" often attract overwhelming support. The deputies do not want to be tarred as bad Muslims, Abdul Aal said, so they usually vote in favor of the measures while privately hoping that neither the COR leadership nor the government act upon the proposals. Al Shaikh complained that the Sunni Islamist MPs' focus on religious issues, and the Shia MPs' focus on economic and social challenges, is a situation that can lead to sectarian tensions. Neither side wants to understand or work seriously on the policies of the other, and as a result the people see Sunnis and Shias pulling in different directions.

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Friendly Relations Between Government and Islamists...  
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17. (C) An open question, subject to much debate and speculation, is the relationship between Al Minbar and Al Asala and the government, prime minister, and king. COR Second Deputy Chair and former head of the Al Asala bloc Shaikh Adel Al Moawada told EmbOffs that his bloc supports the King and government, but not blindly. He recalled telling King Hamad, after the referendum approving the National Action Charter in 2001, "This is no longer yours, it is ours now." He said the government does not intervene in COR business so as to allow the parliament to establish its own credibility and track record.

18. (C) Liberal MP Abdul Nabi Salman points out that Bahrain has a long history of Islamist political activity. The government tolerates the Islamists because they generally have been concerned with religious affairs, not politics or national issues. They served as a useful counterweight to liberals, socialists, and communists during the 1970s, and more recently, to balance the Shia. The government is careful to secure its Sunni base. Salman claimed that the government still uses the Sunni Islamists to keep moderate Sunnis and Shias from forming an alliance. Leading Shia opposition society Al Wifaq Advisory Council member Nizar Al Qari voiced a similar view. He said he believes the government encourages the Islamists. While senior government officials know the majority of Bahraini citizens (read: Shias) disagree with the religious initiatives, Al Asala and Al Minbar pursue them anyway as "agents of the government." These policies represent a way to divide and rule, Al Qari said, using sectarianism as the wedge to keep the Sunni and Shia communities apart.

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...But No Touching the Cookie Jar  
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19. (C) Ibrahim Sharif, president of the liberal opposition Al Waad society, said the government does not challenge the Islamists on their policies. In exchange, they "do not touch the cookie jar." Sharif argued that the Islamists are silent on issues such as corruption, land development and reclamation, the constitution, electoral constituencies, employment, housing, and other important issues.

110. (C) MP Al Shaikh said that Prime Minister Shaikh Khalifa in particular is happy to let the Islamists pursue their narrow policy agenda. The government historically has made only half-hearted attempts, and little progress, addressing key Shia issues such as unemployment, wages, housing, and social insurance. (Note: He commented that the recent National Employment and Training Program could be an exception.) The policies of the Islamists could harm the commercial environment by making investors and tourists feel less welcome, thus adding to Bahrain's social and economic challenges. The government, therefore, is able to blame the Islamists for the situation instead of taking responsibility for it.

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Specter of Islamist COR to Scare Democracy Advocates  
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111. (C) Others assign more sinister motives to the PM, who is often accused of quietly opposing the King and Crown Prince's political and economic reform programs. Dr. Muneera Fakhro, vice president of Al Waad society, said that the PM points to the anti-business measures taken by the Islamists and tells people, in particular business leaders, that this is what they get when they demand a more open, democratic system. Al Wifaq member Al Qari said that the PM wants the

Islamists to pursue their agenda because their success demonstrates for all observers that the elected deputies are incapable of governing, thus delegitimizing the parliament and reform program.

¶12. (C) Islamic bloc MP Al Shaikh said the PM uses his influence with the Islamist and "Independent" (pro-government) deputies to slow down economic reform legislation. A good example is the Crown Prince's labor reform legislation, which the COR has tied up with debates since November 2005. The Islamist agenda also gives the PM a reason to attack the King's reform plan, according to MP Abdul Aal. The PM can point to actions by the Islamists and say that reform and democratization are ruining Bahrain's traditional openness, and argue that the present time is worse than the "good old days," before there was an elected chamber.

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Cabinet Positions Reward for Loyalty  
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¶13. (C) Several contacts argued that the government rewarded the Islamists for their loyalty by the appointment of Dr. Mohammed Abdul Ghaffar as Information Minister (in addition to his previously held position of Minister of State for Foreign Affairs) and Dr. Fatima Al Balooshi as Minister of Social Development. MPs Salman and Abdul Aal and Al Waad VP Fakhro all stated independently that both Abdul Ghaffar and Al Balooshi are affiliated with Bahrain's Muslim Brotherhood. (Comment: Which is pro-government, unlike in many other Arab countries.) Salman said Abdul Ghaffar was "the worst person" to head the Information Ministry, which is responsible for the state-owned news outlets, the foreign press center, and the tourism directorate, because he could impose his personal religious views on the Ministry's policies.

¶14. (C) As reported reftels, Abdul Ghaffar made headlines last Ramadan (early October - early November 2005) by instructing five-star hotels to close all bars and clubs during the Holy Month, an unprecedented move in Bahrain. He also sanctioned those outlets that did not comply immediately with the order by closing them for the seven days following Ramadan, which included the festive Eid Al Fitr holiday.

¶15. (C) In defending this policy, Abdul Ghaffar said that "even some (MPs) who drink supported the Ramadan ban and the punishment of those who broke it." Jamal Fakhro, a businessman and member of the appointed upper house Shura Council, refuted Abdul Ghaffar's assertion that tourism was not harmed by the ban and complained that the Minister had "followed MPs' orders" even though the COR had only passed an "iqtirah bi raghba" rather than legislation banning alcohol during Ramadan. In a meeting with the Bahrain Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Abdul Ghaffar threatened to take strict measures against anybody who tries to transform Bahrain's tourism facilities into "dens of prostitution and sin." Since this controversy in late 2005, Abdul Ghaffar has yielded a bit, at least on cultural activities. The Ministry of Information sponsored American hip-hop band Opus Akoben's performances in Bahrain in February and sponsored a public-private partnership presenting the "Spring of Culture" series of performances, lectures, and events during the month of March, including American jazz musicians and Lebanese and Egyptian female singers. (Comment: In its interactions with Abdul Ghaffar at the Foreign Ministry and the Information Ministry, the Embassy has found him to faithfully adhere to palace and government policy. Interestingly, he told us he wants to use Bahrain television to provide a platform for voices of moderation in Islam, and sought American help to reform Bahrain television.)

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New Salafi Society Launched  
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¶16. (C) In a new development on the political scene, the National Justice Movement was launched March 5. Movement head attorney Abdulla Hashem said publicly that the group was an opposition movement with the aim of reinforcing national unity. Hashem's roots are in the socialist movement of the 1970s but the main supporters of the new movement are hard line Sunni Salafis. While Al Asala represents pro-government Salafis, Justice Movement supporters, according to Shura Council member and critic Faisal Fulad, are "Salafi/Al Qaeda." A founding member of the Bahrain Human Rights Watch Society and a frequent sparring partner with both Sunni and Shia Islamists, Fulad attended the Justice Movement launch event and told EmbOff that about one-third of the 150 people attending were hard line Salafis. Former Guantanamo detainee Adel Kamel Hajee, who returned to Bahrain in November 2005, spoke at the gathering and complained that he had moved from "a small prison to a large one," saying he did not have freedom of movement in Bahrain and was monitored by security personnel.

17. (C) In a statement to the press March 19, Hashem said it was a "source of pride" that some former Arab/Bahraini fighters in Afghanistan (from the time of the war against the Soviet occupation) had joined the Movement. Mohieldine Khan, who was arrested in June 2004 and charged with planning terrorist attacks in the country, was appointed head of the Movement's executive committee. Liberal MP Farid Ghazi, a former colleague of Hashem's in the National Democratic Gathering Society, commented that Hashem was so desperate to get elected to the COR that he was willing to make a deal with people whose beliefs and values are radically different from his own.

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No Natural Alliance Between Sunni, Shia Islamists  
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18. (C) Echoing Al Qari's comments in Ref B, MP Abdul Aal and Al Waad President Sharif said they believed that Shia Islamist society Al Wifaq would not form an alliance with the Sunni Islamists, should Al Wifaq decide to participate in the legislative elections and win seats in parliament. Sharif said that Al Wifaq President Shaikh Ali Salman is a pragmatic politician who focuses on bread and butter issues, not religious affairs. Abdul Aal said that Al Wifaq's agenda does not include symbolic religious matters. Al Wifaq would want to work on issues affecting their constituents like employment, housing, wages, and combating corruption. He noted, however, that Al Wifaq could find itself pushed into a corner to support the Sunni Islamist proposals, so it did not appear to be anti-Islamic. Abdul Aal said even the appointed Shura Council members might have to support these proposals, if the proposals cleared the COR and were formally passed to the Shura, because "they are also members of this society."

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Comment  
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19. (C) Political rivals of Sunni Islamists often find themselves on the defensive in the COR as the Islamists force votes on proposals that any Muslim would have a hard time opposing on religious grounds. Al Waad VP Fakhro lamented that "unfortunately, the political system is more open and liberal than the people who participate in it." That said, it is non-Islamist deputies who are the leading forces in two areas where the COR has excelled: monitoring and oversight of the government budget, and demanding government accountability through the questioning of ministers. If it decides to participate in the elections, Al Wifaq could further enhance the COR's performance in these areas because of its policy focus on national issues rather than religious affairs.

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